

Garment worker rights and the fashion industry's response to COVID-19

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Abstract

In this commentary, we examine the fashion industry's early responses to COVID-19. Looking across fashion's global production networks, we argue the fashion industry's response has been rapid, yet highly inequitable, reflecting – and further entrenching – existing inequalities in the industry.

Keywords: COVID-19, fashion, worker rights, inequality

Introduction

While the fashion industry may not be the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of COVID-19, like so many industries, it has been significantly impacted by this global pandemic. In this commentary, we examine the fashion industry's response to COVID-19. We highlight how the crisis has reinforced existing structural inequalities within the industry, with workers disproportionately impacted across multi-mediated global production networks (GPNs), and what this reveals about the fashion industry's ability – and willingness – to respond to crisis.

The impact of COVID-19 on the fashion industry

When COVID-19 hit, the impact on the fashion industry was immediate. Due to public health concerns and social distancing measures, within days, governments around the

world demanded the closure of non-essential retail, including fashion. After closing their doors, many retailers pivoted to online sales, began fundraising for local and international charities, and developed plans to support employees. In countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, many frontline retail workers became eligible for federally sponsored wage subsidies while they are unable to work due to shop closures. Brands big and small, from Prada and Dior to Tanya Taylor and Knixwear, retooled to produce essentials in short supply, such as personal protective equipment (PPE), for workers on the front lines. Some fashion councils launched hardship funds to support independent fashion businesses, which now face even more uncertain futures as consumer spending on fashion continues to spiral.

We watched these early responses to COVID-19 with great interest. Here was an example of the fashion industry, one of the most exploitative and inequitable industries in the world (Bick et al., 2018), acting in a way that was nimble, responsible, and compassionate. As Vogue UK described it, the 'kindness' of the fashion industry was shining through. However, as the crisis has continued to unfold, longstanding tensions have begun to surface. Fashion and apparel retailers closed the doors to their brick and mortar storefronts with promises to support their 'communities', all the while halting production in global factories, leaving millions of garment workers without job security and, in some cases, without payment for work already done (Anner, 2020).

Despite pressures from transnational labour rights activists to support garment workers (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020), fast fashion brands such as Primark, C&A, and Zara are cancelling orders, which has a significant impact on garment workers around the world (Workers Rights Consortium, 2020). The Center for Global Worker Rights (CGWR) conducted a survey of Bangladeshi garment manufacturers, estimating buyers have cancelled \$1.44 billion worth of garment exports, leaving factory owners unable to pay their workers (Anner, 2020). Home garment workers, who typically lack formal employment contracts, are excluded from any financial support offered by brands, manufacturers, and/or governments (Nagaraj, 2020). Moreover, migrant garment workers are uniquely impacted by precarious labour under government lockdowns (Samaddar, 2020).

What does COVID-19 tell us about the fashion industry's ability to respond to crises?

COVID-19 has brought existing inequalities across fashion's GPNs to the surface. The fashion industry, and fast fashion in particular, has a history of actively working to hide certain facets of its GPNs which may clash with, and ultimately undermine, brand identity, such as the treatment of garment workers (Crewe, 2018). GPNs are the 'nexus of interconnected functions, operations and transactions through which a specific product or service is produced, distributed and consumed' (Coe et al., 2008: 272). The last large-

scale disaster to hit the global industry, the Rana Plaza building collapse, temporarily disrupted dominant narratives surrounding GPNs by revealing ‘neoliberal fantasies of growth without human (or, for that matter, planetary) cost’ (Siddiqi, 2017: 276).¹ Again now, in the wake of COVID-19, we see the fashion industry’s response to crisis only serving to reinforce deeply entrenched inequalities.

COVID-19 has highlighted geographic asymmetries in worker solidarities, making it increasingly apparent who is considered part of the ‘team’ (‘visible’ workers such as retail workers) and thus deemed worthy of support or protection, and who is not (‘invisible’ workers such as garment factory workers and home workers). Rana Plaza revealed limitations to compensation schemes and understandings related to worker wellbeing which emerge from these divisions (Prentice, 2018). The increasingly globalized, multi-mediated landscapes of GPNs complicate capacities to implement hyper-localized systems of support. The financial hardships facing garment workers as a result of COVID-19 fall outside the remit of previous employment support schemes – real or imagined – as these focused only on measures for compensation in the context of workplace injury or death, further signaling a need for more nuanced understandings of wellbeing (Prentice et al., 2018). The needs of garment workers are notably absent from brand press releases, and while they may be a part of private closed-door conversations as a result of pressures from campaigners, their needs in this time of crisis have yet to be addressed. Thus, we do not see GPNs as politically neutral (Lebaron and Lister, 2015). GPNs, operating under the logic of global capitalism, enable companies to absolve responsibility for the social and environmental externalities of their industry. With limited liability for their actions, companies are less likely to engage in long-term efforts to support garment workers within supplier countries. Shifting away from accountability models that focus solely on the role of individual companies requires acknowledging interconnected components of GPNs (Coe et al., 2008).

Post-Rana Plaza, Baumann-Pauly et al. (2018) proposed a model of ‘shared responsibility’ which called for broadening the scale and scope of understandings as related to GPNs to support far-reaching and wide-ranging partnerships. As Kabeer (2019) has highlighted, however, shared-responsibility models must acknowledge the power imbalances at work across space between buyers and factory owners. In the wake of the 2013 disaster, Chowdhury (2014) called for a ‘transnational analytic of care’ which is ‘cognizant of the local *and* global processes that create conditions of vulnerability for women and form the asymmetrical planes in which cross-cultural alliances and solidarity practices must happen’ (2014: 9). We argue these approaches may be helpful to confront existing and emerging inequalities across fashion’s GPNs in the context of COVID-19.

¹ The Rana Plaza building collapse occurred on April 24, 2013, in Savar, Bangladesh. More than 1,100 workers were killed, with thousands more injured, producing fashion and apparel products destined for consumption in Western markets.

To better support garment workers impacted by crisis across GPNs, fashion brands must expand their understanding of 'community' and seek-out shared-responsibility approaches which acknowledge interconnections across their global supply chains. Blanket, top-down solutions lack the capacity to support important nuances distinct to particular contexts (Brooks, 2007; Kabeer, 2000; Seidman, 2007). Garment workers producing fashion and apparel items are uniquely positioned within GPNs to best identify their local needs during a crisis. If shared-responsibility models aim to support garment workers, the majority of whom are women, they must incorporate bottom-up solutions. This will lay a resilient foundation to support worker realities in a more nuanced and meaningful way, providing pathways for workers to communicate their needs in discussions related to health, safety, and wellbeing in real-time.

Conclusion

Investigating the fashion industry's response to COVID-19 thus far, we see that the industry's GPNs are in fact capable of responding rapidly to external crises. We found a stark contrast to how brands have responded to a crisis at their doorstep while failing to address the implications of COVID-19 across globalized, multi-mediated GPNs. Brands and retailers must acknowledge their networks of production and reimagine their responsibilities with respect to notions of care in the context of worker wellbeing.

Moving forward, fashion faces an uncertain future. While retail workers, many of whom work in highly precarious employment situations, were supported in the early days of the pandemic, this may change. While some brands have been caught violating social distancing policies in their distribution warehouses, others have been accused of firing workers who were engaging in union activities during the pandemic (Paton, 2020). With millions of jobs at bankruptcy-related risk, employment situations may worsen (Business of Fashion, 2020).

While the ongoing pandemic may also serve as a rallying call for new initiatives aimed at supporting worker rights across GPNs, as the industry grapples with the mounting financial impact of this crisis, there remains the risk that the industry will slide back to business-as-usual. With increasing ties to social inequalities and environmental destruction, there are calls for the industry to take this opportunity to rethink its scale and scope (Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion, 2020). If indeed this is a moment for reflection on imbalances of power across GPNs, the voices of workers must be prioritized. This must follow a transnational analytic of care which supports workers through solidarities across borders. As the pandemic continues to unfold, future research will be needed not only to monitor the evolution of the fashion industry in the post-COVID-19 era, but also to ensure structural inequalities disproportionately impacting workers across GPNs are acknowledged and addressed.

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